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VII. — *Notes on Homeric War.*

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THE Homeric poet is not composing an Art of War; his aim is rather to please than to teach. In a well-known passage of his *Republic*, Plato gibes those who regard Homer as the highest authority on military science, — saying that if he had really known what was to be done in war he would have been a soldier and general himself, and not a poet; he would have chosen to do brave deeds rather than to tell of them, to be the man to receive praise than the one to confer it. But the warriors of Plato's time were thought to draw inspiration and stimulus from the *Iliad*; Aristophanes declares that Homer taught better than all others the marshalling, brave deeds, and arming of men; and the great Napoleon, who solaced his weary exile on St. Helena by the perusal of the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*, is quoted as saying that in reading the *Iliad* he felt each moment that Homer was a warrior himself, and had not (as some of his commentators asserted) spent the greater part of his life in the schools of Chios. An enthusiastic Frenchman has even suggested that the poet was aid-de-camp or military secretary to Agamemnon. Though Homer knew no strategy in the modern sense, nor any manual of arms, nor evolutions of a squad, a company, a regiment, or a brigade, — yet he was familiar with many notable deeds of brave men, and delighted in them.

In modern times and civilized countries, war is an exceptional occurrence, and few in a generation are called to take part in it. Americans have prided themselves on their citizen soldiery, who would leave the works of peace only at the stern call of duty, and who returned as soon as possible to their homes and ordinary employments, like Cincinnatus laying down their arms and military offices. But in the

Homeric Age, deeds of violence were common. Even in a time of supposed peace a hostile force might invade the land any day or night, with no formal declaration of war. Arms were man's natural accompaniment. "All Greece wore steel," as Thucydides tells us. "War is the proper work of man," Odysseus says to Agamemnon in the third day of battle.

The war before Troy was in the main a succession of single combats between champions. The common soldier is of little importance in the fight; he kills no hero. No "bow drawn at a venture" smites a king between the joints of his harness. The ordinary Homeric scene of conflict is not unlike what Shakspeare presents at the close of *Macbeth* and in *Henry Fourth*, part first. The absence of Achilles from the fray is more deplored than that of all his Myrmidons, and when his friend Patroclus enters the battle, accompanied by his followers, the Trojans appear to be dismayed not so much by the advance of the twenty-five hundred common soldiers as by the appearance of the brave son of Menoetius and his esquire in glittering armor. The poet nowhere tells his hearer how large was the force of men before Troy.

Agamemnon reviews his troops at the beginning of the first day of battle, and exhorts them to fight bravely, but gives no directions either then or later as to the position of the several tribes in the line. Each leader goes where he pleases, and fights with whom he will. The poet narrates no strategic movements of an army or part of an army, no manoeuvres, no flank movements, no concentration of forces at a special point in order to break through the enemy's line, no surprises. No body of men is stationed for the defence of an important post, or brought to the support of a hard-pressed division, or sent against a weak place in the enemy's line. Neither Telamonian Ajax from Salamis nor his namesake the Locrian, the son of Oileus, is ever accompanied by his own forces, but the two (though of different tribes) generally keep together, and move from one part of the field to another according to the apparent need or fancy of the moment. Ajax, the son of Oileus, indeed, could not be

attended by his countrymen, since they were archers, while he excelled in the use of the spear; he must be in the forefront of battle, while they must stand in the rear of the heavy-armed forces.

The use of chariots by many of the chieftains, of itself tended to separate them from their commands; like the Locrian Ajax they could go where their countrymen could not follow them. On the third day of battle when Idomeneus, the Cretan, and his lieutenant, Meriones, return to the field of battle after a short absence, they do not ask where their own men, the Cretans, are fighting, but where the Achaeans are hardest pressed. As they appear on the scene of conflict, all the Trojans advance against them, as if the strife were between one hundred men on a side, instead of one hundred thousand. The individual and his bodily strength are clearly far more important than in modern warfare. The victory is not that of the troops, nor of the leader and his troops; but of the leader alone. Perhaps we may compare the song of the Israelites: "Saul hath slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands." When Agamemnon is wounded, Diomed is downright discouraged, although all else is going well, yet Agamemnon is important only as a mighty man of valor, not as a commander-in-chief. No one receives instructions from him in all the course of the *Iliad*. Thus also Hector, though the chief Trojan leader, is not kept informed of the condition of the fight at other parts of the field than his own; no official reports are brought to him, and no directions are sought from him. When a leader is slain, his command devolves upon no other. Even the common soldier seems very much left to himself, although subject to harsh rebuke if he plays the coward. The movement of a body of men who follow their captain may be compared with that of a flock of sheep with their bell-wether (to use a Homeric figure), rather than to the regular advance of a modern military company.

So completely is the hearer's attention concentrated on an individual or on a single group of warriors that at times before a single combat two antagonists hold a long conversa-

tion as if they were alone on the field. Thus when Achilles and Aeneas meet, the first blow is preceded by one hundred verses of talk, — partly a reminder by Achilles to Aeneas of a similar occasion when he had fled from him, but mainly Aeneas's recital of his family tree ; and this was when Achilles was most vehement in his anger against all the Trojans.

This habit of the poet, to give prominence to the individual, may spring from his desire to concentrate his hearer's attention, affording but a dull background for the principal figures which are brought into high relief and have a strong light thrown on them. With this may be compared the practice of the Greek dramatic poets in presenting only two or three characters at once to their spectators in the theatre. Masses of men awaken less sympathy than individuals. The hearer's attention is drawn by the poet away from the accessories, and concentrated upon the chief actors.

Possibly, however, the poet's method of description of the war by a succession of single combats, is not to be explained entirely from his artistic principles ; it may have been influenced also by the fact that the earlier epic poets in their briefer lays, which furnished material and precedents for the Homeric poems and adventures, doubtless sang of much smaller armies, less elaborate expeditions, and of single exploits. At the opening of the third great day of battle, "the son of Atreus shouted aloud and bade the Argives gird themselves for the fray," — an action more appropriate to the commander of a military company than to one of an army of a hundred thousand men. Other and similar indications may be found of the poet's having in mind a smaller body of men than the Catalogue of Ships presents. For example, Nestor and Agamemnon find Diomed sleeping outside of his tent, "with his comrades about him." This does not look like a division of five or six thousand men, but rather like a single ship's company. When Hector is wounded, all the Trojan chieftains gather about him ; and when he sees Teucer's bowstring break, he shouts to "Trojans, Lycians, and Dardanians," as if the disabling of one Achaean bow meant triumph for the Trojans. The same Hector shouts to the Trojans and allies to stand

firm while he changes his armor ; and he runs after the comrades who were taking to Troy the armor of Achilles which had been stripped from Patroclus. And when the commander-in-chief of the entire Achæan expedition returns to his home, his treacherous cousin Aegisthus lies in wait for him with men in ambush ; a conflict ensues, and all the combatants on both sides are killed in the house of Aegisthus. But not a word is said about any conflict outside of the palace, and the number of men engaged cannot have been large. If Agamemnon led five or six thousand men, what did these do in their leader's behalf?

To the considerations already offered which suggest that the expedition at the basis of the Homeric story may have been much smaller than the Catalogue of Ships implies, may be added the somewhat obvious thought that an army of a hundred thousand men could not subsist on the enemy's country without more definite arrangements for supplies than Homer knows. Capricious expeditions for plunder to Lyrnessus or another small town of the Troad would not suffice. Neither army has a definite system for the supply of food. When the Trojans bivouac on the plain they send to their houses for their bread. The supply of water and the policing of so large a body of men would present other and serious problems which do not seem to have occurred to our poet.

The earliest form of the *Iliad* very possibly knew only of a small expedition, and one which remained only a short time before Troy. Only in two passages of the *Iliad* does the poet show knowledge of a ten-years' siege, although this period is definitely fixed in the *Odyssey*. The *Iliad* contains few allusions to the earlier battles of the war, even where we might expect these. Every reader has observed that a dozen battles as bloody as those of the *Iliad* would have left alive but few of Priam's fifty sons.

No indication is given by the Homeric poet of any organization of the forces nor of any division which might correspond to our regiments and companies, until immediately before the first battle of the *Iliad*, when Nestor suggests

that the men be divided into tribes and clans, that tribe may aid tribe and clan aid clan, and that they may know who of the leaders and which of the peoples is cowardly, and who is brave. Agamemnon accepts this advice at once with the remark that if he had ten such counsellors as Nestor, the city of Priam would soon lower its head. Clearly the suggestion was novel; the system which it contemplates cannot have been general or universal. On the Trojan side, swift Iris, messenger of the gods, in the guise of a son of Priam, gives to Hector advice very similar to that of Nestor, — that each chieftain of his allies should command his own countrymen.

Councils of the “elders” or chiefs of the Achæan army are held before the first battle of the *Iliad*, and at the close of the second day of fighting, and are referred to elsewhere; but so far as can be seen, these do not discuss particular plans of campaign or of battle; they consider a proposal to end the war, a truce for the burial of the dead, the placation of Achilles, the sending of a spy into the Trojan camp, the building of a wall about their ships and quarters. If we were to borrow the language of the football field, we should say that the Homeric warriors had no “team-play.” Yet the Achæans did not despise the skill of a leader, as may be seen from the honors paid to Nestor and Odysseus. Early in the *Iliad*, Nestor calls Agamemnon and Achilles “first of the Achæans in counsel and first in battle”; and Helen characterizes Agamemnon to old Priam as “both a good king and a brave warrior.” Doubtless this is in part equivalent to the familiar phrase with regard to George Washington, “First in war, first in peace,” but a nearer equivalent might be the simple contrast of *thought* and *action*.

The battles, as has been said, were decided by a succession of more or less formal single combats of heavy-armed men, although at times a group of two or three on one side would oppose a similar group on the other. No one of the Greeks interferes in the conflict between Achilles and Hector; — indeed, Achilles motions to the rest to stand aloof, that he may have all the glory of the victory; and the contest be-

tween Hector and Patroclus may fairly be called a single combat, although Euphorbus and Apollo interfere against Patroclus. A typical example of the champion is presented in Paris, as the two armies advance for battle on the first day of conflict : Alexander stood forth as champion for the Trojans, with a leopard skin upon his shoulders, and a bent bow and a sword, and brandishing two spears he challenged the bravest of the Argives to fight against him in dire conflict. As the battles on the plain of Troy may be compared to those of the forces of David and Saul with the Philistines, so no better illustration can be found for the proposition of Paris than the challenge of Goliath of Gath : "I defy the armies of Israel this day ; give me a man that we may fight together." The similar challenge of Hector at the close of the same day of battle, since it aimed at nothing more than the determination of personal prowess, resembles more closely that of a knight of the age of chivalry, and his duel with Ajax has been compared to a modern duel, which is interrupted by the first flow of blood, and after which the combatants shake hands and separate.

The three main divisions of the Homeric army were those of later Greek times : spearmen, horsemen (on chariots), and light-armed troops, with bows and slings. Engineers, sappers and miners, and the like, were unknown. The archers and slingers, though they seem to have been far more numerous than the spearmen, were of little real importance in the battle. They stood behind the heavy-armed troops, and served only as reinforcements to them. By themselves they never advance nor withstand an attack. The sling, indeed, is mentioned but twice in the *Iliad*, and seldom does the poet allude to the effectiveness of a body of bowmen. The masses of the hostile armies generally keep at a safe distance from each other.

In addition to the forty shiploads of Locrians, the 350 companions of Philoctetes are designated as archers among the Achæan forces, and the Thracian Pæonians on the Trojan side. Only two of the Achæan chieftains use the bow in

the story of the *Iliad*, but in the *Odyssey* the Ithacan hero tells the Phaeacians of his skilful use of the bow on the plain of Troy, and employs this power at the close of the poem, with good effect, by killing Penelope's suitors, though in the *Iliad* he is a spearman. In the Trojan army, Paris, his brother Helenus, and Pandarus are archers, but they serve also as spearmen. The poet does not seem to regard the bowman as necessarily less brave than the spearman, nor does he think, like the Athenian dramatist, of the Asiatics as archers as contrasted with the Greek spearmen. Was not Apollo, the god of war, a bowman? and his sister Artemis, an archer? Did not Heracles vie with the gods themselves in the use of the bow? Was not the bow of Heracles in the hands of Philoctetes important in the final contests before the city?

The Homeric chariots were not the scythe-bearing chariots of some of the eastern nations, nor were they in any special way prepared for war. The same vehicle was used without change, in combat, for a race, and on a journey. In the Homeric battles, chariots were not used in ranks to form a company or squadron; each was at the special and independent service of some heavy-armed leader. At times a blow is struck or a spear is thrown from a chariot; a warrior may be killed on or from a chariot,—the latter especially in a rout where the chariot is in pursuit. Yet, as a rule, the chariots are used only for easy and rapid transport from one part of the field to another, where the warrior may be more needed,—for keen pursuit, and especially for speedy retreat in time of stress. The chariots serve only the chieftains,—never the ordinary warrior. The men who use chariots are the men who carry the heavy shields, of which the weight becomes a burden, and renders long-continued and rapid movements difficult or downright impossible. Archers have no chariots; they need none since they bear no heavy shields and since for the most part their place is in the rear, out of reach of immediate danger. On Corinthian vases, representations are found of the horseman who rides to the battle, but then dismounts and gives his horse into the care of his

esquire, that he may fight on foot like the Homeric chieftains. So Hera and Athena journey in their chariot from the home of the gods to the plain of Troy, but leave their horses near the river Scamander and enter the battle on foot. Thus also Aphrodite, when she is wounded by Diomed, goes to the left of the line of battle, and borrows the chariot of Ares for her return to Olympus,—having no chariot of her own in the conflict. Possibly in earlier ages or in other parts of Greece squadrons of chariots may have been used in war, as they were by the Egyptians and the early Celts, but the Homeric poems contain only slight traces of such a custom.

Cavalry were not used in the Homeric age. The heavy shield of the spearman could not have been conveniently carried on horseback.

The brunt of the battle was borne by the heavy-armed soldier, the later *hoplite*, in the Homeric time as well as in the historical period of Greece, although the ratio of these troops to the light-armed forces was much smaller in Homer's age than in Athens and Sparta in the time of the Peloponnesian War. In the hand-to-hand conflict the warrior was wont to hurl his spear against a foeman who stood a rod or two away from him, and then profit by the confusion which the spear had caused to rush forward and recover his weapon, which evidently must be regained or the warrior was nearly helpless, being without his most important arm. If he slew his antagonist, he endeavored to despoil him of his armor, or even to drag the corpse within the lines of his own friends, and to gain possession of his chariot. The fiercest conflicts arise over the bodies of fallen warriors, whose friends wish to give them honorable burial, and whose foes would treat them with despite and give them like the body of Jezebel to the dogs to devour. If the cast of the spear failed of its desired effect, the two warriors would rush together armed with their swords or even with stones. But often a speedy retreat was necessary if the cast of the spear was ineffectual, or if the enemy gathered in a group against a single man. For this series of operations much agility was required, and speed of foot was a prized quality. Hector calls the combat

a "dance in honor of Ares." One of the most frequent epithets of Achilles is "swift-footed," and his friend Antilochus is praised by his father Nestor as "exceeding swift in running, and a good fighter."

The battles on the plain are intended only to weaken the Trojans. The Achaeans make no attempt to take the city by storm, nor by a close siege; and indeed since the ancient city walls have been laid bare by the excavations of the last quarter of a century, we see plainly that without engines of war and projectiles more powerful than bows, an assaulting army would suffer much and accomplish little. Andromache reminds Hector, it is true, that thrice the two sons of Atreus and their companions had assailed the city "by the wild fig-tree"; but this passage was rejected by Aristarchus, and seems to be under the influence of the later story which made Aeacus an associate of Poseidon and Apollo in building the walls of Troy. The confidence of Polydamas is fully intelligible: that if Achilles shall desire to come from the camp and fight about the wall of the city, he will weary his horses, but will not sack the town.

The siege of Troy certainly was not close according to our standards. From the first the Trojans had accepted the defensive method of warfare, and Hector complains that the elders of the city had been blindly infatuated in their course, and he insists that now when the gods have granted to him to gain glory by the ships, the Trojans shall not return to the city to be cooped up within the walls. The Trojan allies also seem to have been quartered within the town; they have no camp on the plain corresponding to that of the Achaeans, and when they are driven in flight by Achilles they retire in confusion within the walls of the city. Yet at night the Achaeans withdraw to their camp, which we may think of as three or four miles from the city, and the people of Troy are free to open their gates for the entrance of supplies and of friends, and for the departure of those who prefer to go. The Trojans still have some flocks and herds pasturing on the mountains, and they visit the fields and forests to obtain

wood, although they are obliged to abandon the use of the stone washing-troughs by the sources of the Scamander, where "the wives of the Trojans and their fair daughters were wont to wash their gleaming raiment formerly, in time of peace, before the sons of the Achaeans came." But the wealth of the Trojan city is gradually exhausted by their own needs and by gifts to their allies, and they cannot long continue to maintain the defensive position; they must drive the enemy from the land, or yield. Hence though fewer in number they come forth to fight. Their families are safe for the present behind the city walls, but the pressure of humiliation and physical discomfort is too great to bear indefinitely.